

Against the Grain v8, #2 PREPRINT especially for
ALA Midwinter, January 19-23, 1996
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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

SN: 1043-2094

Counterpoise: A New ALA Review Journal A Brief Conversation with Charles Willett, Editor

by Katina Strauch (Against The Grain)

ATG: We've been hearing about a new ALA Review Journal called *Counterpoise*. Can you tell us about it?

CW: Right now, *Counterpoise* is a non-existent review journal, and I'm its editor. Quarterly publication starts in January 1997. For years I've dreamed of working with the American Library Association to edit and publish a comprehensive selection tool that would help librarians buy independent, non-corporate materials. Now the dream is beginning to come true.

As coordinator of the Alternatives In Print Task Force (AIP) of ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) since 1993, I've received terrific support for this idea. Many active AIP librarians work with alternative publications. Noel Peattie has self-published the biannual *Sipapu* since 1970 and is ending it now after 52 issues. Sandy Berman and Jim Danky have edited *Alternative Library Literature* (McFarland & Co.) biennially since 1982. Chris Dodge and his wife Jan DeSirey have self-published *MSRRT Newsletter* ten times a year since 1988. I've put out *APT for Libraries* (CRISES Press) annually since 1992. Byron Anderson, on behalf of AIP, has compiled two editions of the directory *Alternative Publishers of Books in North America* (CRISES Press, 1994 and 1995).

Dan Tsang does indexing for alternative books and journals. And Steven Harris is Book Review Editor of the *SRRT Newsletter*.

But individual efforts like *Sipapu*, *MSRRT Newsletter*, and *APT for Li-*



braries achieve only modest success. Circulation is low; they're not comprehensive; they don't carry the authority of an organization like ALA, marketing and financing them is difficult, and they rarely outlive their first editor.

Counterpoise can overcome those difficulties as a cooperative effort organized and operated by an experienced group of librarians and editors. At the 1995 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia, the SRRT Action Council led by Stephen Stillwell, Jr. voted unanimously to support the project. Now all we need to do is set it up.

ATG: What kind of reviews will you publish?

CW: *Counterpoise* is fortunate to have good models to follow: ALA's *Booklist* (trade and reference works for public and school libraries) and ACRL's *Choice* (trade and university press titles for academic libraries). SRRT's *Counterpoise* will be the third leg of the stool, covering the alternative press for all libraries in much the same systematic, reliable fashion. We plan to include occasional bibliographic essays and resource lists in addition to many reviews.

ATG: How many per issue?

CW: That's hard to say. For Volume 1 in 1997 we will invite all alternative publishers in the U.S. and abroad to send us two copies of each 1995 or 1996 English-language imprint to be considered

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for review. No one knows how many titles that will involve, or how many publishers will respond, or what our operating budget will be. The 1995 edition of *Alternative Publishers of Books in North America* describes 119 active presses, publishing a total of about 1,000 books a year. We'll start modestly, examining every title sent to us and establishing a high standard. Then we'll gradually expand as circumstances permit.

ATG: Who will write the reviews?

CW: So far, about fifty librarians around the country have agreed to write reviews, and more are expected. Volunteers choose the subject area(s) in which they have experience. We will send them one copy of each title (which they get to keep), holding the other copy at the editorial office for control.

ATG: What kind of books will be reviewed? The subject area, that is?

CW: Just about any subject. When I was order librarian at the Harvard College Library 25 years ago, the order forms told vendors (in three or four languages) not to send cookbooks. But last year the Vegetarian Resource Group sent me a copy of Debra Wasserman's *The Lowfat Jewish Vegetarian Cookbook*, and I realized it made a strong political statement against meat.

ATG: Just books, or journals as well and CDs too?

CW: Everything, as long as the imprint is 1995 or later: monographs, new and continuing serials, A/V tapes, compact disks, even databases like **Ralph McGehee's** remarkable **CIABASE**.

ATG: Could you talk for a bit about alternative publishing? What have the trends in this been over your career?

CW: Several elements have come together to produce the alternative press revolution: new communications technology, expanding media monopolies, political and economic repression, and popular movements for human rights,

peace, the environment, personal freedom, and a more democratic and equitable society. In our field, an added factor is the increasing dependence of libraries on corporate sponsors and business partners, to the exclusion of alternative publishing.

ATG: What is alternative publishing?

CW: The best definition I've seen is in the *Introduction to Alternative Publications: A Guide to Directories, Indexes, Bibliographies and Other Sources*, produced by AIP and edited by Cathy Seitz Whitaker (McFarland, 1990). It lists four criteria which convey the spirit of the alternative press: 1) The publisher is non-commercial, i.e., more concerned with communicating ideas than making money, and/or 2) the subject matter pertains to social responsibility, such as the attempt to a) achieve rights for an oppressed group of people; b) see economic justice for all individuals; c) disperse political power among members of society, and/or 3) the publisher would define itself as a publisher of alternative materials, and/or 4) the work is published by a small-press poetry or literary publisher.

ATG: Can you comment on the relation, if any, between alternative publishing and small press publishing?

CW: The alternative press (which the Library of Congress still calls the "underground press") is a subset of the small press (which it calls the "little press"), but the boundaries between the two are not clearly defined. It's the thought that counts. Many concerned anthropologists, economists, environmentalists, etc. create thought-provoking, socially responsible literature; so do many concerned poets, writers, critics, etc. *Counterpoise* will give concerned librarians a way to identify, evaluate and acquire that literature and to build thought-provoking, socially responsible collections.

Note: Charles says if you're coming to Midwinter in San Antonio, to stop by the ALA/SRRT/COUNTERPOISE booth, number 986 and learn even more. — KS

Counterpoise is edited and published by the Alternatives In Print Task Force of the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the American Library Association.

It is designed for use by schools, colleges, universities and public libraries—and by inquiring individuals—as a reliable source of information about significant, English-language titles published in the United States and abroad which have been overlooked or slighted by mainstream review journals.

counterpoise n. 1. A counterbalancing weight. 2. Any force or influence that balances or equally counteracts another. 3. The state of being balanced or in equilibrium.

counterpoise' tr. v. 1. To oppose with an equal weight; to counterbalance. 2. To act against with an equal force or power; to offset.

—The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.

Subscriptions:
Volume 1- , January 1997- (four issues):
— Institution \$35
— Individual \$25
— Student, retired \$15
— Canada, Mexico: add \$ 5
— Others, surface: add \$ 5
— Others, airmail add \$15

Make checks payable to:
ALA/SRRT/COUNTERPOISE
(Check from a US bank or an international money order.)
Counterpoise is a publication of the American Library Association, which has IRS 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status.

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